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10th Anniversary of September 11: Tips for Parents and Caregivers

The 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks is a significant event for the United States. Most people will focus on remembering those who died, honoring those who keep the country safe, and reflecting on the country's resilience. However, some adults and children may be at risk of an "Anniversary Effect"—the experiencing or re-experiencing of strong feelings related to the attacks.

Extensive media coverage of the anniversary and memorial dedication will likely include footage of the attacks. Many children will be seeing these images for the first time. For others, this renewed focus on the tragedy can bring back the feelings they had when it occurred. This is particularly true for individuals who were personally impacted by the events. Additionally, greater attention to this frightening time for the country may contribute to an already heightened sense of anxiety related to our continued state of war, the troubled economy, and the recent rash of natural disasters.

Parents and caregivers know their children best. Reassuring your children that they are safe and you will take care of them is most important. Also, by being aware of possible risks and reactions, you can help your children process their thoughts and feelings about the anniversary in healthy way.

1. **Be prepared for your children (and for you) to experience a surfacing of emotions.** The range of reactions will vary depending on your children's personal history and connection to attacks. Many children will exhibit little to no change in emotion or behavior. Older children may re-experience feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, or grief like those felt during the attack. Related symptoms may include disruptive behavior, reduced concentration, heightened irritability or sensitivity, and withdrawal. Usually, symptoms will subside with your reassurance and support. Keep in mind that children, particularly young children, look to adults for cues on how to respond to events and challenges. Your attitude and reactions will shape those of the children in your care.
2. **Be aware of more severe reactions.** Some children may demonstrate more intense, persistent reactions that warrant professional mental health intervention. These symptoms include:
 - Refusing to go to school and excessive "clinging"
 - Persistent fears related to the catastrophe
 - Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, or bedwetting
 - Physical complaints for which a physical cause cannot be found
 - Withdrawal from family and friends
 - Sadness, listlessness, or decreased activity
 - Preoccupation with the disaster
- Pay particular attention to these symptoms if your children witnessed the attacks, lost a loved one, suffered posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), have other mental health issues, and/or have experienced another traumatic event. Contact your pediatrician and/or your school psychologist or a private mental health professional.
3. **Be mindful of your family circumstance.** Additional stress on family life from circumstances such as financial difficulties, military deployments, mobility, health problems, or divorce can increase children's anxiety and sense of insecurity or risk. Your reassurance is especially important in these instances.

4. **Be a good listener.** Take time to listen and talk to your children. Let them guide the discussion. Reassure them that it is okay to feel sad or upset when they think about an unhappy event and that it is natural to have such feelings on anniversary dates. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Your children might prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet.
5. **Limit TV and exposure to negative images.** The media is likely to dramatize the anniversary. Watching replays of the attacks or stories about Homeland Security, the ongoing wars, or efforts to catch the remaining terrorists can raise your children's anxiety levels. Also, monitor Internet and social networking activity.
6. **Spend family time.** Doing enjoyable activities with you reinforces your children's sense of stability and normalcy. Try to do things together, such as eat meals, read, play sports or games, go for walks or bike rides, or watch nonviolent, nonstressful TV. Be observant and open to their questions, concerns, and/or increased signs of anxiety.
7. **Maintain a normal routine but be flexible.** Ensure that your children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. ***This is particularly important since they are also adjusting to being back at school.*** Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed. Spend extra time with them at bedtime if they are having difficulty sleeping.
8. **Emphasize the positive.** Whether it is at school or at home, anniversary activities should center on the positive attributes of lost friends or loved ones and/or the empowering effects of the recovery process. This includes the importance of family, a stronger sense of community, increased civic activism, the desire to help others, tolerance for people's differences, and a greater appreciation for the rights and responsibilities of American freedom.
9. **Share any concerns with your children's new teachers.** This is important at any time during the school year, but particularly at the beginning when teachers have not had time to get to know their new students well. Let the teacher know if you think your children are likely to have a difficult time with the anniversary and the best way to communicate with you.
10. **Find out how your children's school is planning to handle the anniversary.** Your school may have a plan for helping students during the anniversary period. This will depend on the school and could include conducting classroom activities or school-wide memorial activities. You should be informed of these plans and know that ***participating in any activity should be your children's choice, not required by the school.***
11. **Remind your children to be respectful of other people's reactions.** Children don't always know how to respond to classmates who seem sad, frightened, or insecure. Suggest that simple actions, like saying, "I am sorry you are sad," will make both your children and their classmate feel better. Reiterate that teasing or bullying is never okay, that how people express their feelings is personal, and that all feelings are valid. ***However, encourage your children to tell an adult if a friend seems overwhelmed by their emotions or talks of hurting themselves or others.***
12. **Be aware of your own reactions.** You may also be affected by the anniversary. Your children will look to you for guidance and will also gauge their current situation based on your reactions. Connect with family, friends, or members of your faith community and don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it. Take care of your own health by getting regular meals, exercise, and sleep. Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.